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ABSTRACT

English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) students often finish their language courses without ever having an opportunity to interact with native English speakers or without getting an idea of what the target culture is really like. Interactive videoconferencing can help students gain insight into the target culture when they are using conversational skills learned in the classroom to have authentic dialogue with native English speakers. One instructor's experiences with interactive videoconferences between ESL students at the University of Mexico's Permanent Extension School in San Antonio (Texas) and Spanish students at different universities and high schools in Texas are described. Discussion focuses on various factors that must be taken into consideration when organizing an interactive videoconference, and provides suggestions on pre-conference planning, procedures for the actual videoconference, and follow-up activities. Contains 6 references. (Author/MSE)

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Conversations from Afar:

Improving Conversation Skills and Cultural Understanding through Videoconferencing

by

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ABSTRACT

EFL/ESL students often finish their language courses without ever having an opportunity to interact with native English speakers or without getting an idea of what the target culture is really like. Interactive videoconferencing can help students gain insight into the target culture while they are using conversational skills learned in the classroom to have authentic dialog with native English speakers. This article discusses one instructor's experiences with interactive videoconferences between ESL students at the University of Mexico's Permanent Extension School in San Antonio and Spanish students at different universities and high schools in Texas. It focuses on various factors that must be taken into consideration when organizing an interactive videoconference and provides suggestions on pre-conference planning, procedures for the actual videoconference and follow-up activities.

Introduction

Unfortunately, in spite of the communicative approaches that are being used in numerous ESL/EFL programs around the world, many students finish their English courses and still cannot carry on a conversation with a native speaker. In addition, they lack insight into the culture whose language they are studying. Johnson discusses some international students she had in one of the MA TESOL courses she teaches at Southern Illinois University who, in spite of many years studying English, "were not knowledgeable about the meaning of behaviors in the target culture" (1997:11). The international students knew how to behave (externally), but they did not understand the meaning of the behavior (1997:11) as most of them had had little or no opportunity to speak with native speakers outside of class.

The instructors at our institution feel that actual interaction with English speakers is extremely important, and we promote this whenever possible. One of the methods we use to do this is interactive videoconferencing; that is, by means of our videoconference system, we set up exchanges between our ESL students and native English speakers. Since our ESL student body is comprised mainly of Spanish speakers, we usually do this with American students who are studying Spanish. By way of interactive videoconferencing, the students can hear each other, see each other and converse together, which is the objective of the videoconference.

Reasons for using videoconferencing

Generally speaking, students lack the opportunity to practice outside of class the language they are studying. This is to be expected in an EFL situation, but it can also be true for students studying ESL in the United States. In some cities, the minority-language population is so large that students can survive without ever having to use the target language. If the students' language is spoken by a large number of people from the mainstream population, as is the case in San Antonio, there is even less opportunity for learners to use the language in real life situations. In places where the minority language is not spoken by many people, it can still be difficult for students to practice. Members of minority groups tend to socialize with members of their own ethnic group; most of them do not have American friends to converse with. In addition, many Americans are impatient with non-native speakers of English or, at least, that is the perception students have. That is why many students are afraid to take risks. They do not want to irritate someone or be laughed at.

It is therefore a good idea to arrange for culture exchanges at school so that students can get the hands-on practice that they need. However, this is not always possible, even within the city, due to conflicting schedules, transportation problems and bureaucracy. Thus, it makes sense to use interactive video-conferencing. This is an innovative way of providing students an opportunity to interact with native speakers of the language they are studying without even leaving the school. Not only does it give students the opportunity to practice the

language they are learning in a situation of real communication; it also provides students from different ethnic backgrounds insight into each other's culture.

Support for videoconferences can also be found in literature on language teaching. Several of Brown's principles for designing techniques for teaching oral communication skills apply to videoconferencing. For example, he recommends that techniques be intrinsically motivating, that they encourage the use of authentic language in meaningful contexts, that they provide feedback, that they link speaking and listening, and that they provide students with opportunities to initiate oral communication and make use of speaking strategies (1994: 268-9). Speaking with native speakers is very motivating, since it is the very goal that many students wish to achieve. Authentic language is, of course, being used during these activities, and feedback is immediate, consisting of whether or not the learner can understand and be understood. If not, speaking strategies learned in the classroom must be used. As for initiating conversation, cultural exchanges allow students not only to answer questions but also to actively start a conversation or influence the direction it takes once it has been started.

Factors to take into consideration when planning a videoconference

Before setting up a videoconference, technical aspects must be taken into account. First of all, the videoconferencing systems of the institutions that are participating must be compatible. This information can be provided by the person in charge of distance learning. Once compatibility is determined, a site must be chosen; that is, an available videoconferencing room must be found and

reserved. In small schools, this might be an easy task; in larger schools, it could be more complicated. In addition, a date and time must be agreed on that is convenient for each of the participating groups. Although circumstances vary from one institution to another, these arrangements will most likely be worked out through or in cooperation with the distance learning center.

Kearsley points out that external factors such as sound quality, lighting, acoustics, and classroom distribution play an important part in interactive videoconferencing (1995: 85). If the sound quality or the acoustics are poor, it is harder for students to understand what is being said. If the lighting is bad, it can affect the image and also impede understanding. The way the students are seated also has an effect. The seating arrangement should be set up in a way that allows the camera to focus on the person who is speaking. This creates a more realistic environment and enables students to better understand what is being said. Looking at a person's face, seeing his mouth form the words and interpreting body language all aid student comprehension.

Once the technical matters have been arranged, it is time to consider the students who will be involved in the activity. Some of the factors that should be taken into account are the age of the students, their level of proficiency, their educational background, their interests and their needs. While it is not necessary for students from both groups to be the same age, have the same level of proficiency, etc., it is important to remember that the more similar the groups are, the greater the possibility of success. For example, college students would probably have more in common with other college students than they would with

high school students. With reference to level of proficiency, students feel more comfortable when speaking with people whose level of proficiency is similar to theirs. When one group's speaking ability is noticeably higher than the other group's, the students with a lower proficiency level tend to feel inhibited. This can be mitigated by advance preparations, such as controlling the topic, using cue cards, etc.

Planning the videoconference

The success or failure of a videoconference can be determined by advance planning. It is necessary for the two (or more) instructors involved to work together to determine the objectives, type of interaction desired and the procedures to be followed (Cortés & Galindo 1998: 255) Is the purpose of the activity for students to practice structures studied in class, have free conversation, or learn about culture? Any of these could be legitimate objectives, as could many others. However, it is important that the instructors involved discuss this and reach an agreement on the best possible way for the objective to be achieved.

The type of interaction that will be used to reach the chosen objective should be decided on in advance. Should it be formal or informal? Should students take turns or should they speak spontaneously? Should a question and answer format be followed? Should a specific topic for discussion be chosen or is impromptu speaking better?

The procedures to be used must also be decided on in advance. For example, English learners could speak only English, and Spanish learners speak

only Spanish. Another option is for English to be spoken during half the videoconference and Spanish during the other half. Both options have advantages and disadvantages. In option one, students speak the target language, but they do not get to hear it. In option two, students might lose interest when only their native language is being spoken. Perhaps a better option is for students to use whichever language they want at any given time. Whatever decision is taken, however, must be made by both instructors after considering all options carefully.

Preparing Your Students

In order to facilitate the success of this experience, it is important to prepare your students. Reviewing Krashen's Affective Filter Hypotheses, Omaggio points out the importance of a learning environment that is conducive to a low affective filter; that is, " (1) the acquirer is motivated; (2) he has self-confidence and a good self-image; and (3) his level of anxiety is low" (1993:51). It can be stressful to speak before a camera, especially in one's L2. Therefore, teachers should do all they can to make their students feel self-confident and comfortable. In order to do this, students need to be made aware of the objectives of the activity they will be participating in and of the procedures they will follow. In addition, a pre-videoconference practice session should be carried out, preferably in the videoconferencing room.

It is also important to give a briefing or lesson on intercultural communication, so that students can be made aware of any conversational taboos that exist in the other culture, e.g. asking about weight, age, income, etc. This helps students to avoid making culturally insensitive remarks that could lead to embarrassment.

As mentioned above, in cases where one group of students has a lower proficiency level than the other group, extra preparations can be made. For example, cue cards can be used with beginners or insecure students. Topics can be chosen and practiced in class before the conference. Although this limits spontaneity somewhat, it can help beginning and low intermediate students to gain confidence.

Examples of some videoconferences at UNAM

Since 1994, the UNAM-San Antonio has held yearly videoconferencing sessions with Texas A & M University–College Station. These sessions, which are carried out between intermediate level ESL students from UNAM and intermediate level Spanish students from Texas A & M, serve as a springboard to other activities. The same basic procedure is followed on all occasions. After getting to know each other during two videoconferences, a cultural exchange takes place. The Texas A & M students invite the UNAM students to visit their campus. Typical activities include a sleepover, parties and a tour of the campus and local attractions. Students from both groups have ample opportunity to interact, practice the language they are studying and, more important, gain

insight into each other's culture. It is an experience to remember, the highlight of many students' language studies. After the visit, the students write to each other via e-mail. Many have formed long-lasting friendships.

Other videoconferences have been held between the UNAM and other educational institutions in San Antonio. One example is an exchange with Advanced Placement Spanish students from Sam Houston High School. After an initial session in which students introduced themselves and asked each other questions, there was a session on culture. The high school students prepared questions in Spanish relating to education in Mexico and Latin America. The UNAM students prepared their answers in English. Excerpts from the first session follows:

Spanish student 1: ¿Qué opinan de San Antonio? ¿Le gustan la ciudad? (What do you think of San Antonio? Do you like the city?)

English students: Sí, sí. (Yes, yes.) (laughter)

Spanish student 2: ¿Muchas fiestas? (A lot of parties?)

English students: Sí. (Yes.)

Spanish student 3: NIOSA (Night in old San Antonio). (laughter)

English instructor: Aldo, do you want to answer?

English student I: Okay. Well, I think it's a nice city. Ah, I've been come here since I was a child. And when I had ... I was living with my aunt and, well, I've been here for a lot of fiestas. And, well, I liked a lot the last

fiestas – the hundred years celebration. The fiesta was, ah, great. And, well, I was, I don't know, 15 years and I love it. This fiesta the weather is, were, not too much, too well, but, after that, I enjoyed the parades and, well, I have learned a lot of thinks in the museums, at the Alamo. And, and, well, I love to go dancing. I love the music Tex-Mex and have go, have gone, to well many places to dance that with my cousins. They dance very well, and they have, doesn't have, to dance. It's pretty difficult. It's just turn around and all those things. (laughter) In Mexico, we don't dance like that, and I think I'm improving too in my dance language (laughter)

English student 2: dancing skills.

English student 1: Yeah, dancing skills too. And well, I have...ah... I love to go to the library – Enchilada, the Red Enchilada (laughter). And I love it. It's a great library.

Spanish teacher: It's beautiful, isn't it?

English student 1: Yeah, and I think ... well, I'm proud because it was an architect, a Mexican architect, who designed that library. I'm proud of him and I don't know if you have saw, have seen, the movie of Selena. They show

part of the library there in the movie.

English teacher: Really?

English student 1: Yeah. Well, I'm proud of all the things Mexicans have been doing here or, well, Latin Americans. And I'm proud of you because you're now learning English.

English students: Spanish.

English student 1: I mean Spanish.

From this excerpt, one can see that the students are really engaged in communicating. In spite of some mistakes in form, they are able to get their message across. In addition, it is apparent they are having a good time doing it.

Some positive and negative aspects of videoconferencing

There are many positive aspects of using videoconferencing in language learning. To begin with, it is an innovative, hands-on approach to practicing conversation. It provides students an opportunity to converse and exchange ideas with students from other cultures, thus facilitating intercultural understanding. At the same time, it allows students to see the universality of language learning. The challenges, struggles and joys of learning to express one's thoughts in another language is not unique to learners of one language in particular; learners all over the world share similar feelings, experiences, frustrations and sense of accomplishment. Realizing this helps students attain a more positive attitude towards the difficult task of learning a second language.

In addition, student enthusiasm for this type of activity is very high. Evaluations completed by the students after the videoconference almost always contain the request to "do it again soon."

Videoconferencing can also function as a springboard to other activities. E-mail correspondence is a natural follow-up, and it becomes more interesting once a student has seen and talked with the person who will be his partner. When the distance between the two sites is not far, visits, parties or informal get-togethers might be possible. In addition, tapes of the actual videoconference can be used as a teaching tool. Students enjoy watching themselves and can learn a great deal from this activity.

There is also a negative side to videoconferencing. Whenever one deals with new technology, there is a possibility of technical problems. For example, sound quality might be bad or, even worse, there could be no sound at all; the connection could be interrupted suddenly in the middle of the activity; or, for unknown reasons, there might be no connection at all. All of these things have happened to us, but they are the exception, not the rule.

Other factors that might be inhibitive are the costs involved, e.g. the connection, the rent of the room, etc., and the bureaucracy of making the arrangements. The biggest drawback, however, is fear of technology on the part of teachers or students, mostly the teachers. This fear is usually due to lack of training in the use of technology. Barker states that teachers must be trained if they are expected to use technology effectively and points out that this is rarely the case (1995:7). He notes that few training programs focus on teaching

instructors "how to incorporate technology into instruction, create new opportunities for interactivity or develop materials and use the media most effectively" (1995:7). If instructors are to employ videoconferencing, their institutions need to provide support and the necessary training. Otherwise, state-of-the-art equipment is not used to its full advantage.

Conclusion

While there are some disadvantages to using videoconferencing, the benefits well outweigh the bad points. It is a change of routine, an innovative way to give your students the opportunity to get real hands-on language practice. It takes time and effort to plan a videoconference, and you can expect to make mistakes in the beginning. However, when you see your students' enthusiasm, when you see them speaking the target language, communicating with native speakers of the language they are studying, it is well worth it.

It should be noted, however, that there is a considerable lack of information on this relatively new teaching technique in the literature. The use of interactive videoconferencing in language teaching holds promise for the future. Research needs to be conducted, experiences shared, and training sessions for instructors established. Only then will teachers and their students be able to take full advantage of this state-of-the-art teaching tool.

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